

DISCONTENTED FEMALE BODY AND THE ALIENATED SELF IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *LADY ORACLE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to study the discontented body and the alienation of the self in Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle. The novel discusses the woman's condition, role and position in world which is dominated by men and social conventions. The body plays a major role in the construction of self and also forms the expression of female mind. Joan Foster experiences alienation on account of her body right from her childhood. The discontentment caused by the effect of the predefined gender roles results in self alienation and Joan is unable to over this in her adulthood. Joan develops multiple selves' expresses herself as writer of Gothic fiction and poetry.

KEYWORDS: Objectification, Multiple Selves, Gothic Fiction & Relationship

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INTRODUCTION

Lady Oracle, written in 1976 is the third novel of Margaret Atwood. This paper attempts to study the discontented body and the alienation of the self in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*. The novel discusses the woman's condition, role and position in world which is dominated by men and social conventions. The body plays a major role in the construction of self and also forms the expression of female mind. For hundreds of years human body has been used to express a person's thoughts, feelings and emotions. People manifested their views and ideas through actions and appearances of the human body. As time passes by, even though there are so many changes in the shape, size and meaning, the human body is still used for self expression.

Women are characterized as irrational, passive and dependent in contrast to men, who are considered rational, active and independent. Margaret Atwood in her *Lady Oracle* shows how the socialization process of patriarchy shapes and institutionalizes sex roles and suggests that the sex roles are not biologically determined but they are determined based on cultural definitions of a male chauvinistic society.

Discontented Female Body and Self Alienation

Lady Oracle is an autobiography of Joan Foster in which she records her growth from a girl to a matured writer. It is structured like a journey of the protagonist in which through her romance with the costumed men she deconstructs the roles assigned to women by means of the power of her pen. Thus, her writing precisely depicts the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought.

In her third novel *Lady Oracle* Atwood overtly uses parody and satire as literary devices to subvert and thereby expose prescription of love, romance and beauty imposed by the culture of patriarchy. During an interview with J.R.Struthers, Atwood says that Joan develops "3/4 of an inch" (qtd Vevaina 71) for, at the end of the novel,

she decides to return to Toronto to clear her friends Sam and Marlene of the charge of murdering her. Yet she continues her Costume – Oriented fiction filled list style without a second thought.

From early childhood, Joan experiences alienation on account of her body. She feels objectified even as she says, while she is with Arthur; “I was like a kid’s chemistry set for him: secretly he liked mixing me up, he knew, something exciting would happen” (LO, 20). The roots of these feelings can easily be traced to her childhood experiences. She resorts to a fantasized romantic life even while she is supposedly happily married to Arthur.

In a society expects slenderness, her excess weight marks her as an undisciplined woman, a non-conformist, who occupies more than her allotted space. By diminishing the female form, patriarchy diminishes woman, promoting devices such as the corset to imprison her in the feminine ideal. Women are expected to adapt themselves to masculine desires. Woman who fail to adapt are not accepted as woman. Overweight in her youth, Joan explains: “some employers welcomed me: I was as cheap as a woman but didn’t cause the disruption among male employees and customers like other women did” (96). Exceeding her allocated female space, Joan exceeds the cultural definition of her gender and is thus not viewed as a woman. “Therefore inability to experience acceptance or rapport is felt to be identical with loss of acceptance of self” (qtd. Vevaina 62). Joan’s rapport with her mother is not commendable. The relationship is crucial to understand Joan’s complex character. Her identity confusion begins with her name itself. Later, when she is older she wonders if her mother had named her:

After Joan Crawford (...) did she name me after Joan Crawford because she wanted me to be like the screen character she played – beautiful, ambitious, ruthless and destructive to men – or because she wanted me to be successful? (...) Did she give me someone else’s name because she wanted me never to have a name of my own? Come to think of it, Joan Crawford didn’t have a name of her own either. Her real name was Lucille Le Sueur, which would have suited me much better (...). To think that I named you after Joan Crawford, my stomach would contract and plummet and I would be overcome with shame (...) there’s more than one side to Joan Crawford, though. In fact there was something tragic about Joan Crawford, she had big serious eyes, an unhappy mouth and high cheekbones, unfortunate things happened to her. Perhaps that was it. Or, and this is important: Joan Crawford was thin (LO, 45).

Her mother’s cruel and suicidal remarks about her weight reinforce her feelings of low self-esteem. Feelings of shame about her body are implanted in her. The negative self-images hinge on her mother’s rejection of her body and consequently lead to self-abuse which is manifested in her eating disorder. Desperation to please and a craving for approval become recurrent behavioural pattern in all her relationships.

A moving episode in the early part of the novel is of Joan as a schoolgirl, rehearsing hard for a role as a butterfly in a school recital. Much to her disappointment, on account of her size, she is made to play a mothball by her mother and teacher. This leaves a permanent scar on her psyche. Dance is a recurrent motif in the novel. Her mother shows utter callousness in handling her daughter. From this point on, the body plays a crucial role for getting society’s approval and comparison. Obesity becomes a cause for ridicule. The Brownie’s refrain: “A Brownie gives in to the older folk. A Brownie does NOT give into herself” (56) reinforces the need for approval. In an attempt to gain her mother’s approval, poor Joan makes ‘clumsy’ attempts at helping with house work. Low self-esteem persists even in her later life. Joan’s extensive eating gets worse successively as her self-image worsens. She develops sadomasochistic traits for she sees

overeating as a way of getting back at her mother. She says "I ate to defy her, but I also ate from panic. Sometimes I was afraid I wasn't really here, I was an accident, I'd heard her call me an accident" (82).

Her mother simply denies her an emotional life or attachment of any kind. Her coldness alienates Joan from others as well. Joan however relates well with Aunt Lou and the two go to movies together. Despite the closeness however, she perceives her own body as an object:

There staring at me in the face was my thigh. It was enormous, it was gross, and it was like a diseased limb, the kind you see in pictures of jungle natives: it spread of forever, like a prairie photographed from a plane, the flesh not green but bluish-white with veins meandering across it like rivers (133).

Joan has to come to terms with her body and rely on an external incentive, where Aunt Lou has promised money, to make change.

Joan fantasizes that the warm and earthly Aunt Lou is her mother for she never gets hugged or cuddled by her mother. Joan observes: "I could always recall what my mother look like but not what she felt like"(95) and she goes on to describe what Aunt Lou felt like. These experiences increase the alienated form and disgust with her own body. The only power Joan has over her mother is by tormenting her through her father and she glories in that. To add to it she defiantly scuttles all her mother's attempts to make her a replica of herself and triumphantly feels: "I had defeated her. I couldn't even let her make me over in her image, thin and beautiful" (94).

Joan feels a sense of triumph at this point seeing her mother drunk, crying and crumbling in front of her. When Joan gets thinner and goes on a diet, her mother loses control over her and is devoid of any other purpose in life. It is as if she thrives on abusing her daughter not being able to punish her emotionally any longer, she gives in to rage and physically abuses her by plunging a knife into her. When Joan becomes thin she still feels alienated but for different reasons. The body fat had served as insulation, a cocoon. It had been a disguise to camouflage her as she puts it: "I also longed to be fat again. It would be insulation, a cocoon. Also it would be a disguise...Without my magic cloak of blubber and invisibility, I felt naked, pruned as though some essential covering was missing" (157).

Joan develops multiple selves on account of the objectification caused by her body. She continues to be haunted by her mother albeit through her visions as she realizes that the strange lady of the "*Lady Oracle*" poems she writes about under the influence of Automatic writing is really her mother: Joan says:

She never really let go of me because I had never let her go. It had been she standing behind me in the mirror, she was the one who was waiting around each turn, her voice whispered the words. She had been the lady in the boat, the death barge, and the tragic lady with flowing hair and stricken eyes, the lady in the tower. She couldn't stand the view from the window, life was her curse. How could I renounce her? She needed the freedom also; she had been my reflection too long (329).

Joan's search for a mother and a positive role model never stops. Even after four years of marriage she admits: "I carried my mother around my neck like a rotting albatross. I dreamed about her often, my three-headed mother, menacing and cold" (213).

The other vision that haunts Joan is that of the Fat Lady whom she had given the face of a fat friend at high school, Theresa. This figure appears whenever she is under emotional stress. This is Joan's shadow which keeps her.

The multiple selves Joan develops play out the drama of the Gothic romances she writes. The heroines of the Gothic romances of Joan are slender, beautiful females, which reflect her mother's idea of a female in a male chauvinist world. This is because of the discontentment caused by her body. Joan's early childhood experience of rejection and pain makes her devour these romances and live through their characters as any emotional life is denied to her.

Joan's gothic romances express mystery, excitement, danger and action along with the domestic activities and social roles which has been traditionally performed by women. There is no conflict between these two worlds but infact they complement each other.

Joan's personality affects her relationship with men. Joan gets on and off in relationship with men in her adulthood. She enters relationships with her head mystified by gothic romances she had read and which she writes; often imagining herself as caught up in the dramatic lives of the characters. Paul, her first lover, proves to be very patriarchal in views on women and Joan finds traditional role expectations very uncomfortable.

CONCLUSIONS

Atwood parodies conventional ideas of romance and passion espoused in Gothic novels by juxtaposing the real life marriage, that of Joan and Arthur, with the Costume Gothic ideas of passion and love and deflating them even more in the process. Arthur ignores Joan's sexual needs and she returns to the Royal Porcupine to satisfy them. This relationship is also ends in failure as she is objectified both in terms of being a celebrity and a woman.

Like her Gothic heroines, Joan escapes the situation when it gets too claustrophobic and stifling. She dons another identity by staging a drowning and escapes to Terremoto in Italy. Be physically distancing herself from the past, however, she cannot free her psyche from the haunting figures of the past; not does it change her alienated condition. Feelings of alienation from her body persist and appear in the form of the vision of the fat lady overwhelming her to the extent of obliterating herself. Even after a dive into her inner self, she does not emerge an integrated person. Joan compares herself to a performing bear in an arena and this is evidence of her continuing feelings of low self worth. Further she is not freed from the pastern of falling into the arms of strangers. With her head in the clouds, she continues to feed off her Gothic heroines and unwittingly hits a man at her door with a Cinzano bottle, imagining events in her life as a continuity of events in novels she conjures. From Gothic heroine she transforms herself, perhaps temporarily into a caring nurse figure, much like the nurses in the nurse romances that Paul writes under the pseudonym, Mavis Quilp.

Alienation of women from their bodies and spirits due to the consumer society that they live in seems to be leitmotif running through almost all the novels of Margaret Atwood and Joan Foster is not an exception. The high discontent of her body and the effect of it is the resulted alienation.

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